DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 402 507 CE 073 202

AUTHOR Baker, Karen
TITLE Whole Language in ABLE--Just Do It! Research to Practice.
INSTITUTION Kent State Univ., OH. Ohio Literacy Resource Center.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. for Literacy, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Dec 96
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Basic Education; Adult Literacy; Curriculum Development; *Group Instruction; *Literacy Education; Literature Appreciation; Program Development; *Reading Instruction; Reading Skills; *Whole Language Approach

ABSTRACT

The whole language approach was used with a "well" or successful adult basic and literacy education (ABLE) group. Literature was chosen as a curriculum for which group work could be devised that was geared to all levels of students. The book used was "Choices" by George Ella Lyon, a book of short stories written by characters who live in a small mountain community and the choices they made in their lives. No story was longer than four pages, and they were written in the character's dialect. Attendance was voluntary at groups held one or two times per week for about an hour. The group consisted of students at all reading levels, with a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and an age range of 23-65. Students took turns reading the story out loud. The teacher would stop several times during each story for discussion of characters' dilemmas and thoughts. Findings included the following: nonreaders became active readers and participants with the help of other readers; reading skills, vocabulary, and comprehension improved noticeably; students began to take books home; lower-level students, who were quiet and reserved, began sharing their opinions and experiences; and students learned social skills and solved problems together. Students enjoyed having groups and began asking for group work daily. A problem with infighting arose, with hostility developing toward lower-level students. As a solution, students made group rules. After finishing "Choices," students began work on their own short stories. (One student's story is appended.) (YLB)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

Ohio Literacy Resource Center

039-0200-0018

December 1996

*Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio*

**Research to Practice**

ED 402 507

# WHOLE LANGUAGE IN ABLE--JUST DO IT!

*By: Karen Baker, Maplewood JVS-ABLE*

Whole language in adult education. We have all heard a lot about this lately, and the people doing the talking seem to be very enthusiastic. But how do you get started? How do you make it work? There are so many questions to be answered; yet if we wait to start whole language until we get all the answers--will we ever begin? Are our students missing out because we are still questioning? I propose to you to JUST DO IT. I mean, if it worked for *Nike*, it should work for us. My motto as a teacher, much to my aide's dismay, is be fearless, flexible, and take no prisoners. Poor Cheri (my aide and partner in crime) has a hard time with a teacher who doesn't hesitate to change lesson plans in the middle of a lesson when things don't seem to be working. It's uncomfortable for some to work without a safety net. But as teachers, we must be willing to see when things aren't working and adjust.

## *WHAT WE LOOKED AT*

Group dynamics! How's that for a topic? It encompasses so much, yet it seems it has been done to death. But without a "well" group, whole language isn't nearly as successful as it should be. So we at Maplewood JVS-ABLE have been exploring various aspects of group dynamics, with assistance from the OLRC, for several years.

The bottom line is: What makes a group successful? Here are some questions we decided to look at: How does a group gel? Do group members help each other? Does a group make work more difficult? Does it help retention in adult education classes? What about different level learners working in one group? Do some feel left out and others stagnant?

## *CHOOSING CURRICULUM*

I had to devise group work that was geared to all levels of students. Literature seemed the logical choice. Yet the literature we used had to accommodate all levels and work for students who missed a day or didn't attend on a regular basis. I called the Ohio Literacy Resource Center. Always eager to help, the OLRC sent a book titled *Choices* by George Ella Lyon and lesson plans to use at my discretion. *Choices* is a book of short stories written by characters who live in a small mountain community. It's a book about the choices they made in their lives. None of the stories is longer than four pages, and they are written in the characters' dialect, not in proper English (whatever that is). They are very easy to understand, yet rich in meaning. And if a student misses a day, there is a fresh story tomorrow. It turned out to be an excellent choice. *Choices* created many discussions and a few heated debates. It really brought our group to life.



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

## *HOW WE DID IT*

First, let me say attendance was voluntary. We had a group of all levels. Some students were reading at a 12th grade reading level, some at a 2nd, and some not at all. We had a group of about eight at all times with a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Ages ranged from 23 to 65. Many of our students said they had never read a book in their lives, so the prospect of reading was not real attractive to them. Protest as they may, they all joined in. After all, most of us like to be where the action is.

We held group one or two times a week, for about one hour. Students sat around a table, and we each had our own book. We read each story out loud, taking turns reading. If students did not want to read, they said, "pass." Many times Cheri or I would also say "pass" in order to help nonreaders feel like they were not the only ones. We would stop several times during each story and discuss the characters' dilemmas and thoughts. This enabled each student to listen to the story and participate in analyzing its meaning, whether they could read or not.

I facilitated the group while Cheri took notes on student and teacher behavior, reactions, and interactions. We shared and discussed the notes at the end of the day. Boy, you sure don't realize how much stupid stuff you say until someone is writing it all down. That is a lesson in itself! But I digress.

## *WHAT WE FOUND*

What we found was both exciting and exhausting. We found:

- Non readers became active readers and participants, with the help of other readers. The first thing we noticed was higher-level students encouraging lower-level students. Example: At first many low level students would pass when it came to their turns to read. Finally, a student decided to read when it was her turn. Although she needed help from the group, which they offered naturally, when she was done a student said, "Why didn't you want to read before? You are a great reader." The other students immediately agreed. This student read out loud from then on.

- Reading skills, vocabulary, and comprehension noticeably improved. Students also helped each other to read. Many times during group students would help others to pronounce words, never letting them struggle with reading. If a student came to a word s/he did not know, the whole group would pronounce it out loud. If students did not know the meaning, they would ask the group for the meaning. This gave us a chance to work on vocabulary. And because we were reading out loud, reading skills were noticeably improving.

  An interesting side-note is that students would correct the grammar in the stories. Because it was written in dialogue there was a lot of slang and improper use of verbs, etc. Our students began correcting the grammar as they read. This opened up a whole discussion on dialogue and on how much they have learned about grammar (we did several whole language groups on grammar, too). The students seemed to take great pride in finding the mistakes and noticing the "errors."

- Students frequently asked if they could take the book home to read. Many students began taking books home from our library and discussing them with other students. Suddenly the books in our lending library, which had collected dust for most of the year, were being checked out. One of our nonreaders got a library card and began using the library. She discovered the young adult literature section and read book after book. One day she announced she had finally read a book from cover to cover by herself. We awarded her a gold bookmark.

- Lower-level students, who were quiet and reserved, began sharing their opinions and experiences. In conversation and in journals students told how they felt they had a voice in group for once in their lives. One student in particular (she is in her sixties) said it wasn't until she came to group that she realized she had opinions and could say them out loud. She said all these years her husband had been the opinionated one; now she found that she had opinions too.

- Students learned social skills, bonded, and problem solved together. Cheri and I really watched the group evolve. They overcame obstacles and learned to socialize together. Problems such as interrupting, using inappropriate language, and criticizing were worked out. Students began sharing problems and offering support and advice. This did wonders for our retention. Coming to class became something they looked forward to. It was a safe place to be with people who cared. Attendance improved!

## *EVIDENCE OF ENJOYMENT*

It was obvious that our students thoroughly enjoyed having group. After the first couple groups, they began asking for group daily. We often heard comments such as, "We learn better this way." Absentees would ask what happened in group, and students who knew they were going to be absent would ask us to wait until they returned to have group so they wouldn't miss it. It was funny because at first students protested about having group, but the problem quickly developed into not having enough groups. *Choices* quickly became a favored activity, and students would often gather the books and set up the table in order to "remind" me that we were having group that day. Many students wrote in their journals about how they learned that their opinion counted for the first time in their lives. They also said and wrote about how their self esteem was greatly improved. Physical signs were lots of laughter, smiles, and red faces from debating (you don't debate about what you don't care about).

## *SNAGS*

As with all things, we had our problems. Infighting reared its ugly head. The first and biggest complaint from the group was that lower-level students were shouting out answers and opinions before it was their turn to speak, not allowing others to have a say. Soon there was hostility in the group geared toward these students. No one would confront them with the problem. They just talked about it behind their backs. Our jovial group became a lion's den. Students who normally sat together were sitting apart. Cheri and I were told how the students felt and at first watched to see if the problem would iron itself out. It did not. Hostility grew, and group grew unpleasant for students and teacher.

It was time for a group meeting. I introduced the suggestion for setting up group rules, "Most groups have rules when they meet, so why don't we make some?" Rules for groups were discussed, and students made their own group rules without pointing fingers or placing blame. This gave everyone a chance to speak, not allowing negative and angry attitudes. All the rules were agreed upon, and if someone broke them in future groups it was nicely pointed out, and the rule-breaker was quick to apologize. Soon we had our group back, and social skills were being learned by all.

## *WRAPPING IT UP*

We finished *Choices* on April 19, 1996, and the students are currently working on their own short stories about a choice they made in their life that was difficult, memorable or made a difference. The students prefer to write their stories and present their drafts to a group, sharing ideas and getting encouragement from each other. We are hoping that next year we will have a *Choices* book of our own to share. At the end of this article is one student's story. We, the group, thought it was beautiful.

## *CHOICES*

I was three years old when I arrived at The Summit County Children's home, with my mom, brothers and sister. It was a very cloudy morning. I was so happy that my mother took me with her, as with working, this didn't happen very often. My brothers and sister didn't seem so happy, as they probably knew why we were there. I myself didn't realize what was going on until my mom picked me up. She hugged me very tightly, kissed me several times and told me that she loved me very much. She put me down, said goodbye, and went out the door. I started to cry very hard. I looked around to see that my brothers and sister were also crying. Then I looked up to see this woman standing there. She started to talk to us in this very soft and low voice. She then asked us for our names, said she was happy that we would be living at the home.

Being only three, she looked very tall and slim. The way she dressed reminded me of the way my mom did. Flowered printed dress with lace at the collar, black tied oxfords. I found that day that she was in charge of the home, and her name was Miss Boetler. We were all then taken to our different departments. She personally took me to the nursery. She must have spent at least an hour talking to me.

After I was settled in, she visited me very often. After a month or two that I was there, she began to take me to her office. We would go down this long flight of stairs, to the next floor. Then down this long hall, pass the isolation ward, where we stayed if we had mumps or something. We would pass the clinic, where taken if we got hurt. Mom Woods was the nurse in charge of the clinic.

It was a long hall that finally led to her office. I would sit on her desk and play for hours, while she did her book work. But she always took time out to play and talk to me. At midmorning she would take me to the kitchen to get a snack, usually an apple or graham crackers. I was there everyday, except on weekends, as those were visiting days. It was like this until I was almost five. So you can see why I loved her so much. I think she helped to fill the void I left.

I was now in the C Department of the home. This was for girls from four and half to twelve years of age. I wish I could remember the matron's name as she was always good to me. On this one morning, which was probably in the month of June, she took me into her office. She then told me Miss Boetler was leaving to get married. I asked the matron if I was going with them. She said, "No, you have to stay." Just another person in my life to leave me. I must have cried all day. All I could think of was myself and how lonely I would be.

It was a very warm day when she came out to the playground to say goodbye. I was sitting on the wood board that surrounded the playground. She was with the man she was going to marry. Miss Boetler kept asking me to turn around and to talk to her. I couldn't; I was crying so hard, with my face in my hands, thinking only of how she was letting me down by leaving.

When I did finally turn around, she was gone. I never saw her again. What triggers this memory is when someone I love and is very close to me is leaving for some reason or another, I now never turn my back to anyone. I wish them well, tell them I love them, and I understand.

*By Dorothy M. Foster*
Former Ravenna, ABLE Student
1996 GED Recipient

**THE OHIO LITERACY RESOURCE CENTER IS LOCATED AT KENT STATE UNIVERSITY**
**414 WHITE HALL, P.O. BOX 5190, KENT, OH 44242-0001**
**1-800-765-2897 OR 330-672-2007 EMAIL ADDRESS: OLRC@ARCHON.EDUC.KENT.EDU**